

Women Be Healthy: Graduating to Better Health

Issue

Cervical and breast cancer are both treatable if detected early. However, women with intellectual disabilities receive screening for cervical and breast cancer at lower rates than their peers without disabilities. Women with intellectual disabilities face a number of barriers to screening receipt including a lack of knowledge or understanding about exams, anxiety or fear, and absence of recommendation by physician.

Program Overview

Women Be Healthy is a course designed to teach adult women with intellectual disabilities about cervical and breast cancer screening. The course aims to help women understand the purpose of the screening exams, what happens when the physician performs the procedure, how to relax through deep breathing exercises, and how to advocate for appropriate health care. *Women Be Healthy* was originally designed as an 8-week, 12 hour course. It has now evolved to an 11-week series with 22 hours of class time.

Making a Difference

In 2010, an instructor from a compensatory education program in an eastern North Carolina community college received training on *Women Be Healthy*. Over the past 2 years, she has had the opportunity to teach the course to 12 of her students with intellectual disabilities. During this time she has had 2 students find lumps in their breasts, tell their parent or case manager about the lump, and have the lump removed by a physician.

Shaping Tomorrow

In March 2012, her second class of students graduated from the *Women Be Healthy* course. At the graduation ceremony, the women were presented with framed certificates to honor their achievement of completing the 11-week course. The women stood with pride next to their instructor as flashes from family members' cameras went off to capture the special moment. Remarks to the packed classroom from the instructor and college administrator described the commitment and dedication of the women to improving their health in the future.

A mother of one of the participants presented each student with a pink rose in honor of their new knowledge about breast cancer.

Contact information

Susan L. Parish, PhD, MSW
Lurie Institute for Disability Policy
Heller School for Social Policy and Management
Brandeis University
slp@brandeis.edu

Acknowledgement

Support for this study was provided by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research Grant No. H133090124

"I think about them being able to get the necessary help to be aware of what's going on with their bodies and taking care of it. In the classroom, it was such a wonderful feeling that I got when my students told me that they had been to the doctors, and they knew what a mammogram was, a pap smear."-

WBH instructor